



A study on Appearance Anxiety, Self-criticism, and Self-reassurance among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

In a world, where social media and cultural norms have lasting consequences on it's audience, getting anxious when it comes to how we look and the choices we make is evident. It's easy to get wrapped in it all and feel as though we are falling short. Criticising ourselves might seem like a tool that helps us improve but often usually leads to damaging effects on our self- esteem and mental health. In situations like this, one needs to understand the value of reassurance. Being able to provide comfort and understanding to yourself is crucial especially during times of criticism and anxiety. The research aimed to study appearance anxiety, self-criticism, and self-reassurance among young adults. Standardized scales were used to measure appearance anxiety, self-criticism, and self-reassurance. The study was conducted on a sample of 30 young adults. The results found that there was significant positive correlation between Hated Self and Threat Monitoring and significant negative correlation between Reassure Self and Inadequate

Self. It is suggested to practise self-compassion, and boundaries when it comes to social media. Additionally, building a self-support system can be helpful.

KEYWORDS: Appearance Anxiety, Self-Criticism, Self-Reassurance, Young Adults

INTRODUCTION

“You have been criticising yourself for years, and it hasn’t worked. Try approving of yourself and see what happens.”

~ Lousie Hay

Everyone thinks about their own appearances daily, from their clothes to their skin. The urge to look your best comes from various aspects of our lives such as social media, societal pressures, personal insecurities, or comparisons to unrealistic beauty standards. When individuals become preoccupied with their appearance, it often leads to being anxious, causing behaviours like scrutinizing every aspect of their body and flaws. When engrossed in such thoughts, one begins to criticize themselves inducing feelings of shame, inadequacy, or hatred.

Self-criticism is directing judgements, comparisons and opinions that are often harsh towards oneself. It comes from a place of fear, such as being afraid to make mistakes, fail or give up. Self-criticism makes us doubt who we are, which impedes our ability to become better versions of ourselves.

Self-reassurance is important to improve our learned habits of self-criticism, it helps replace it with realistic and reassuring thoughts. Confidence and trusting your own abilities help have an optimistic image of ourselves. It is important to recognize and validate one’s feelings, shortcomings, struggles which further helps in developing empathy and kindness towards oneself.

According to a study conducted in China on 96,218 participants, consisting of 40,065 males and 56,153 females (Jie et al., 2023). The results found that appearance anxiety was positively associated with social anxiety. However, self-compassion could mediate the effect of appearance anxiety on social anxiety. According to a study conducted by Kaushik and Batra (2022), on a sample of 362 participants in the age 18-22 years. The results found that there is a significant impact of body image shame on appearance, anxiety, mental health well-being. ANOVA was used and the results showed the effect of body-shaming on appearance anxiety and mental well-being was also substantial.

A survey was conducted by the campus medio of China Youth Daily on appearance anxiety among 2,063 University students which showed that 59.03% of university students were anxious about their appearance. Moreover, only a small percentage (7.87%) were very satisfied with appearance, 9.66% were not very satisfied with their appearance, and 2.45% were very dissatisfied.

Appearance Anxiety

According to Davis (1993), appearance anxiety can be defined as “a subclinical indicator of body dysmorphic disorder, which usually manifests as excessive anxiety about certain physical defects that are often perceived as normal by others.” Hart (2008) defined appearance anxiety as “a preoccupation with one’s appearance and a fear that one’s appearance (body and face shape, height and weight) may be negatively evaluated by others.”

A study was conducted by Korkmazer et al. (2021) on a total of 259 subjects, 128 (female) and 131 (male). The aim of the study was to find the prevalence of smartphone addiction and depression, anxiety and social appearance anxiety in young adults. The results found that there was a high positive correlation between smartphone usage time and smartphone addiction score

and the social appearance anxiety average scores of the social media users was higher than those of subjects who do not use social media. Smartphone addiction scale had a positive correlation with anxiety and social appearance anxiety scores.

A study was conducted to examine whether appearance or fitness social anxiety may independently contribute to the increased risk of eating disorder and depressive symptoms in young adults. The results showed that fitness related social anxiety significantly contributed to both the risk of eating disorder and depressive symptoms. The appearance/ fitness related positively contributed to additional variance for both the risk eating disorder and depressive symptoms in men, but not in women (Alcaraz-Ibáñez et al., 2019).

According to Davis et al. (1993), a study was conducted on a sample of 71 young men. The results showed that appearance anxiety related inversely to physical activity participation. Furthermore, appearance anxiety was predictive self-reported distress during a body composition valuation, but it failed to relate to physiological measure arousal/ anxiety taken during the evaluation. Moreover, half the variance in appearance anxiety was by a measure of upper body self-esteem.

Self-Criticism

Lueke and Skeel (2017) defined self-criticism as “a self-orientation that entails harsh self-scrutiny, negative self-evaluation and an excessive concern with personal failure.” According to Gilbert and Procter (2006), self-criticism can be described as “a way to try to correct or improve the self or to persecute the self for failures.” According to Gilbert (2007), self-criticism can be defined as “a form of negative self-judgement and self-evaluation, which can be directed to various aspects of the self, such as one’s physical appearance, behaviour, inner thoughts, and emotions, personality and intellectual attributes.”

Lassri and Shahar (2012), conducted a study on undergraduates in which the results showed that self-criticism mediated the association between childhood emotional maltreatment and impairment in romantic relationship, even in the presence of a host of personality and psychopathology variables. A study conducted by Sethi (2023) to study the effect of self-criticism on rumination and alexithymia. The results show that inadequate-self positively correlates with brooding and depressed: hated-self correlated with brooding, depressed and difficulty identifying emotions. The study suggests psychotherapy interventions may need modified approaches to work with self-criticism tendencies with clients.

A study was conducted on 205 Israeli emerging adults (118 men and 87 women). The results indicated that higher levels of parental support directly predicted increases in offspring's goal attainment. Further, higher levels of parental support indirectly predicted increases in goal attainment and goal importance via reductions in self-criticism. However, self-criticism did not affect parental support over time (Dickson & Shulman, 2016).

Self-Reassurance

“Self-reassurance is a way of being compassionate to one's suffering and has been operationalized as a way to be soothing, encouraging, and supportive to oneself in the face of setbacks” (Petrocchi et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2020; Gilbert et.al, 2004). According to Gilbert et al. (2004) “self- reassurance is an adaptive self-to-self interaction, specifically as the ability to bring kindness, caring and peacefulness to the self when things go wrong.”

A study conducted by Barcaccia et al. (2022), where results found that mindfulness, social safeness and self-reassurance were the strongest and the most relevant protective factors against depressive and anxious tendencies together explaining over 40% of variance in anxiety

and over 30% in depression scores. Moreover, risk factors explained 23% variance in anxiety and 9% in depression with self-inadequacy, revenge and negative affect being the major risks.

A study was conducted on a sample of 103 female and 97 male young adults. The results found that parents and peers independently contributed to the development of self-criticism and self-reassurance. Especially, controlling for parental care and control, overt victimization predicted inadequacy, self-criticism, and prosocial behaviour self-reassurance. Moreover, prosocial behaviour buffered the effect of overt victimization on self-reassurance. Further, the study suggests avenues for interventions to prevent the development of depressive vulnerabilities in youth (Kopala-Sibley et al., 2013).

PURPOSE

The purpose is to study appearance anxiety, self-criticism, and self-reassurance among young adults.

HYPOTHESIS

There will be a relationship between Appearance Anxiety, Self-Criticism and Self-Reassurance.

METHOD

SAMPLE

A total sample of 30 young adults in the age 18-25 years was collected from the city Pune.

MEASURES

- **Appearance Anxiety Inventory (AAI):** The scale is used to measure cognitive and behavioural aspects of body image anxiety in general, and body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) in particular. The scale as developed by Veale et al. (2014) consisted of 10 items including 2 subdimensions: namely, Avoidance and Threat Monitoring. The scale used a Likert ranging from 0 (Not at all) to 4 (All the time).
- **The Forms of Self- Criticising/ Attacking & Self Reassuring Scale (FSCRS):** The scale is used to measure self-criticism and the ability to self-reassure. The scale consists of 22 items including 3 subdimensions; namely, Inadequate Self (IS), Hated Self (HS), and Self Reassurance (SR). This scale as developed by Gilbert et al. (2004) had a Likert ranging from 0 (Not at all like me) to 4 (Extremely like me).

PROCEDURE

The participants were given standardized scales. The data was collected through google form. The participants were assured of confidentiality & finally, the participants were thanked for their cooperation.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

RESULTS

Table 1

N, Mean and Standard Deviation

	Avoidance	Threat Monitoring	Total AAI score	Inadequate Self	Reassure Self	Hated Self
N	30	30	30	30	30	30
Mean	5.43	4.97	10.4	17.6	19.7	4.17
Standard deviation	4.84	2.80	7.24	8.80	5.58	3.66

Table 2

Correlation between appearance anxiety, self-criticism and self-reassurance

	Avoidance	Threat Monitoring	Total AAI score	Inadequate Self	Reassure Self	Hated Self
Avoidance	—					
Threat Monitoring	0.783 ***	—				
Total AAI score	0.971 ***	0.909 ***	—			
Inadequate Self	0.351	0.285	0.345	—		
Reassure Self	-0.316	-0.286	-0.322	-0.449 *	—	
Hated Self	0.233	0.391 *	0.307	0.541 **	-0.466 **	—

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The results found that the Total Appearance anxiety (AAI) score was significantly positively correlated with its subdimensions, namely, Avoidance and Threat Monitoring ($r = 0.971$, $p < .001$) ($r = 0.909$, $p < .001$) respectively. The results show that Reassure Self was significantly negatively correlated with Inadequate Self ($r = -0.449$, $p < .05$). Moreover, Hated Self was also found to be significantly positively correlated with Threat monitoring ($r = 0.391$, $p < .05$) and significantly positively correlated with Inadequate Self ($r = 0.541$, $p < .01$) and significantly negatively correlated with Reassure Self ($r = -0.466$, $p < .01$). However, the results found no significant correlation between Inadequate Self and Avoidance.

The findings suggest that the individuals experience higher levels of appearance anxiety are more likely to engage in avoidance behaviours and monitor threats related to their appearance. The findings also suggest that the individuals who harbour more negative feelings towards themselves are more likely to monitor threats, feel inadequate and less likely to reassure themselves. Whereas past researchers have cited through meta-analysis findings that self-compassion related interventions produce a significant, medium reduction in self-criticism in comparison with control groups. Further, results found that greater reductions in self-criticism when self-compassion related interventions were longer and compared with passive controls than active (Wakelin et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study was to gain better understanding the relationship between appearance anxiety, self-criticism, and self-reassurance. The results found that there was significant positive correlation between Hated Self and Threat Monitoring. Further, Reassure Self was

significantly negatively correlated with Inadequate Self. To overcome, one should practice self-acceptance, engage in activities that would help build a strong mental and physical well-being. Mindfulness and Gratitude practice can help deal with self-hate moments. Certain limitations of this study could be addressed in future research. For example, Gender differences and a larger sample can be taken for further studies.

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